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ABSTRACT

Students can be motivated to write and be guided through the writing process without giving them the impression that they are doing it again until they get it right. To motivate students, make it known as specifically as possible what kind of written assignment will be required and how it will be graded. Then guide the students towards the goal by giving them pointers, encouragement, and opportunity--reminding them that they do not have to worry about starting at the beginning when they write. Advise students to use a word processor, if possible; and invite students' thoughts in class discussion by specifically asking about complaints, fears, anxieties, and problems. During a class session, student articulation of specific complaints helps them see the value of the assignment. The teacher is given the chance to answer each specific complaint, and students learn to express themselves in ways other than slamming locker doors and grunting obscenities. When announcing the writing assignment, be flexible about the due date. Instead of reading one student's entire essay to the class in one droning narration and then asking, "What do you think of that essay?", read the essay sentence by sentence and, where appropriate, ask "What's good about that sentence?" and "What's weak about that sentence?" Once the class gets used to this pair of questions as regular discussion stimulators, nobody feels publicly picked on when the essays are being read. (RS)

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INTEGRATING CLASSROOM DISCUSSION INTO THE WRITING PROCESS

by Jeff Hill

Recent academic works tend to describe the stunting aspect of traditional English classes of prior generations in contrast to the benefits to be derived from the new waves in educational approaches. One of the most vivid images is presented by R. D. Walsh (1991):

"Let's recall in stereotype the traditional tell'm, drill'm and test'm classroom, with its didactic teacher who saw children as by nature unwilling learners and who periodically imposed a 'composition' to be written at a single sitting, and with little or no discussion. No mention was made of revising, except for 'proofreading' at the end; nor was there any one-to-one conversation between teacher and pupil. Mechanical and grammatical correctness, with neatness, was the desired product. The pupils almost all disliked writing and avoided it when they could."

In recalling the above stereotype and in remembering myself as a pupil within exactly such a system, the term "disliked writing" is a gross understatement. I dreaded writing assignments. Within the format as articulated by R.D. Walshe, I suffered through the process of knowing that what I was writing was never going to be what the teacher wanted; and subsequently having that depressing thought reinforced by the low grade and critical symbols written all over my "composition" when it was returned. Come to think of it, the first time I ever wrote anything that elicited anything akin to positive reinforcement from a teacher was when as a high school

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sophomore I was given a full weekend to write on the theme of education and I wrote on the reasons why I dreaded writing compositions.

I happen to like writing now. But in reading over what tends to characterize descriptions of the more progressive approaches to orchestrating Language Arts classes, I again feel like a junior high school student who dreads writing compositions. I find formidable the assumption that the students will be delighted to have a writing assignment and that they will not be put off by a teacher telling them that whatever they write, they are going to have to write it again and again until they get it right; and that any student who is NOT delighted at such prospects can be written off as unworthy.

There are several valid and valuable points made about the nature of the writing process but, in general, I don't think contemporary researchers present enough specific examples of how to spark the students' imagination to write; how to give them both the freedom of theme, and guidance in structure at the same time; how to overcome their aversion to, if not fear of writing; and most specifically: how to guide them through the various stages of thinking up, fleshing out and revising without the students getting the impression that they are "doing it again until they get it right".

In pondering such a problem, I am prompted to articulate the following as a way to motivate students to write and guide them throughout the writing process:

1: Motivate the students by making it known as specifically as possible what kind of written assignment will be required and how it will be graded. Anticipate the students' most likely question of "how long does it have to be?" by discussing with them one essential aspect of communication in general

and of the writing process in particular: having something to say. Before worrying about filling up a piece of paper with a required number of words, the writer should get excited about what he wants to say; and then try to make each point in as FEW words as possible.

2: Guide the students towards the goal by giving them pointers, encouragement, opportunity, etc.

a: Remind the students that they don't have to worry about starting at the beginning when they write. They can jot down thoughts as they came and piece them together later. Communicate to the students that they don't have to worry about getting ideas. If they didn't have any of their own, they will get plenty of ideas as a result of the class discussions. Communicate to the students that is not plagiarism but perfectly acceptable journalism to work on a piece that is not an original story nor even an original thesis but merely a competent critique of what was discussed in class. Therefore, even the student who starts out convinced he has absolutely no talent or even capacity for writing will be motivated to at least pay attention in class.

b: Advise the students to use a word processor if possible, This will facilitate the suggestion of jotting down ideas as they come and change the connotation of "revising" from "writing it again and again until you get it right" to an enjoyable, creative process. (I had one student who was literally turing in writing assignments in the form of crayon scribblings on torn pieces of paper until he got access to a lap top word processor which for him became a compouter game. Suddenly, he was using spare moments grabbed in class, during lunch time and on the bus to silently plunk away in obvioius enjoyment. For him, the lap top word processor sparked an exposion of creativity.)

c: Invite student's thoughts in class discussion not by blankly stating: "tell me whatever you think" but instead by specifically inviting complaints, fears, anxieties, specific problems, etc. Encourage articulation of the specific complaints of the reading and writing assignments as seen as unfair, too much, too difficult, a waste of time, etc. Encouragement can be in the form of sincere words of praise during class discussion to the student who brought up a point that was probably bothering other students, too. Student articulation of such specific complaints lead to one or more of the following during a class session:

(1) In the process of communicating his specific complaints the student on his own comes to see the value of the assignment after all: a valuable aspect of the thinking process. This can often lead to discussions on those writers who became famous, renowned and, in contemporary times, supremely wealthy through using the medium of writing to work out personal frustrations and even as outright psycho therapy: E.A. Poe (examples obvious); Hemingway (whose anger about unfair, unfeeling and ignorant literary critics led him to portray them as sharks tearing apart his beloved "fish"); Woody Allen (who has built a career as a writer, comedian, director, producer and actor around being neurotic); William Styron (who, when asked about the female character in SOPHIE'S CHOICE who compulsively used invitingly erotic language but who turned out to be frustratingly frigid; and who really didn't have much to do with the story; chuckled and said, "Yes, that was a nice exorcism"); Kurt Vonnegut (who characterizes himself as "an old fart who smokes too many Pall Malls" and repeatedly refers to specific pieces of his works as having been "good therapy"); and Stephen King (who is continuing to make millions of dollars per book contract on the recurring images prompted by

having had a brother who died when an adolescent).

(2) The teacher is given a chance to answer each specific complaint. Because there is the format of class discussion, the answer sometime cames from another student. Therefore, the same complaints that would otherwise be expressed in the form of student-student whining in the hallway about the teacher as weird, out-of-it, too hard, and various vernaculars for "oppressive"; become starting points for satisfying student-teacher and student-student dialogues.

(3) At the very least, the student learns to express himself in ways other than slamming the locker door and grunting obscenities. In pointing this out to the students, another bountiful area for class discussions can be discovered: that there is nothing really evil about periodically slamming a locker door or using a "bad word"; but that the individual whose communication skills become limited to violent outbursts and a limited range of predictable four letter words is falling prey to one of the greatest social sins of all: that of being boring. This message comes out not as patronizing preaching but with academic enthusiasm when the teacher points out that the research of several psychiatrists and PhD's in language and communication have brought out that what is known as obscene language is in general used indiscriminately as Neanderthal grunts by the lower classes, feared by the middle classes and used quite a bit but selectively, creatively and essentially secretly by the upper classes; that such was generally known by linguistic academics as far back as the early 1960's but the stream of "expletive deleted"s emanating from the Nixon tapes which hit the American public in 1973 caused a stampede of students and scholars to research and discuss the patterns in profanity.

The teacher can show video scenes which involve obscene language and invite class discussions on what they perceive to be constituting colorful communication and what they perceive to be offensive and boring. (Along with myself, my own students all found Christopoher Walken's use of profanity in "Boloxi Blues" to be delightful.)

d: Use the dialogues initiated in the above thoughts as well as discussions on the reading assignments to develop brainstorming sessions which in effesc serve as prewriting and revising. When the teacher feels that the students are ready to write up the thoughts generated by the discussions, he can announce, "Hell, it seems that you all have most of the assignment done already. Now, all you have to do is write up what we have been talking about during this unit." It helps to also give the students specific guide questions.

Optimally, a relationship will develop wherein the students know the teacher's purpose is not to get them to write an essay for him but that his purpose is to help them develop the skills which will serve them after graduating from junior high, from high school and from college. My memory as a student is of American high schools in the 1960's having the motivation, for status and funding purposes, of getting as many students as possible INTO college but neglecting to teach them the necessary skills to succeed once they were there; and how it was complacently accepted as a natural fact of academic life that 55% of all first year college students would flunk out or simply choose to leave because of being unprepared for, therefore disenchanted with,

college life.

When announcing the writing assignment, be flexible about the date due. "Please turn in your essay sometime between this Thursday and next Tuesday." As the essays trickle in, savor each one as you read it aloud in class. Of course, reading entire essays in a savoring fashion in class is one more component of the class which gaves important feedback and sharing while at the same time giving the students the impression that they are escaping from further "study".

Instead of reading one student's entire essay to the class in one droning narration and then asking, "What do you think of that essay?", read the essay sentence by sentence and, where appropriate, periodically ask, "What's good about that sentence?" and "What's weak about that sentence?" Once the class gets used to this pair of questions as regular discussion stimulators, nobody feels publicly picked on when his essay is being read. When a sentence is incomprehensible to you as the reader, ask the author in a coffee shop conversational tone, "What do you mean?" The elicited discussion feels not like a teacher trying to elicit the appropriate answer (nor like a student trying to come up with the "right" answer), but like a roomful of fellow graduate students enthusiastically discussing something.

Be surprised and pleased at the original thoughts that are handed in on the essays: "Hey, this is great! He didn't talk about this in class and it is a good point!" "Hey! This is a good point. I never thought of that before, but it is true."

Actually, I started the above delineated system nor for the purpose of developing writing style, but merely to be officially fair when grading a unit in literature class. After my high school class and I had discussed,

brainstormed and anaylzed a reading assignment and all of the tangent discussions the reading assignment had inspried, I would tell the class, "I could give each of you a grade based on my impression of your understanding of the material right now on the basis of your class participation; even if that means awarding a "B" grade for attentive and apparently knowledgeable silence and a "D" grade for what appeared to me to be silent apathy. But I'm sure someone would eventually complain about such a system as being inaccurate and unfair, so please write up what I already know you know."

Ironically, one ultimate result of this system of write-ups as an after thought to home readings and classroom discussions was an observation and suggestion from the Hokkaido International School Headmaster, "You know, your students are really learning how to write. Perhaps we should change the name of your literature class to 'Creative Writing'".